PM calls for diplomatic approach

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THE RIGHT WAY: Tension can be defused if we settle issues through dialogue, says Najib

PUTRAJAYA: PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak yesterday warned of the perils and pitfalls of emotions getting in the way of finding amicable solutions to sensitive issues.

Issues that could stoke tension in Malaysia’s complex and multiracial setting, he said, must be maturely and calmly handled through dialogue and the rule of law.

"I believe tension can be defused if we settle contentions through dialogue engagement and the rule of law," he said at the Prime Minister’s Department's first monthly gathering for the year yesterday.

At the same function attended by Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Dr Ali Hamsa, Najib also stressed the need to pursue the nation's transformation agenda to ensure, among others, sustainable economic growth.

In calling for a more diplomatic approach in tackling sensitive issues, Najib said disputes must be settled in accordance with the law as the country's harmony was at stake.
As a multiracial country, Najib said, Malaysia was highly regarded due to the peaceful co-existence between various communities of different faiths.

"It is pointless to be proud of our success all this while if any major pillar supporting the nation's harmony crumbles. In other words, whatever we have built all this while will be rendered totally meaningless."

A controversy had erupted recently on the use of the word "Allah" by non-Muslims.

This occurred when the editor of Catholic weekly Herald, Father Lawrence Andrew, was reported as saying on Dec 27 that the Catholic churches in Selangor would continue using the word "Allah" during mass in the Malay language despite the Selangor Religious Department (Jais) sending a reminder on the ban on using the word by non-Muslims.

Under the Selangor Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Among Muslims) Enactment 1988, the word "Allah" is among 35 words banned from use by non-Muslims. The rest include "Alhamdulillah", "Shariah" and "Insyaallah".

Andrew's statement was in defiance of a decree by the Sultan of Selangor Sharafuddin Idris Shah on Dec 14 requiring people in the state to comply with the prohibition on the word "Allah".

Last October, the Court of Appeal had decided that Herald could not use the word "Allah" in its Malay edition as the word was not an integral part of the Christian faith.

Andrew's statement had led to numerous police reports by Muslim non-governmental organisations and political parties.

Several groups had also threatened to protest in front of churches in the state but only a small group of less than 100 protesters turned up near the Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Klang during Sunday mass after Selangor Umno barred its members and advised Muslim NGOs against taking part in such an assembly.

The protesters also showed their support for the raid by Jais on the Bible Society of Malaysia last Thursday. More than 300 copies of Bibles in Bahasa Malaysia were confiscated.

It was reported that the Our Lady of Lourdes Church went ahead with using the word "Allah" in reference to God during its Bahasa Malaysia service.

Meanwhile, in an immediate reaction, various religious leaders also called for cool heads to prevail when dealing with sensitive matters.

Minister in Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Jamil Khir Baharom said Malaysians must respect the rule of law and settle discord through negotiations and the legal process.

"His (Najib's) suggestion is apt given the situation. Everyone should use the proper channels instead of resorting to actions that could cause friction," said Jamil, who is in charge of religious affairs.

Jamil said all quarters must respect the court's decision on the usage of the word "Allah".

"In as far as the Selangor religious laws are concerned, the prohibition on the use of the word 'Allah' applies to all non-Muslims, and not just the Catholics, as these are gazetted by the state. The state has autonomy over its own religious rulings."

Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism (MCCBCHST) president Jagir Singh said dialogue was the only viable option in reducing friction.
He said the 10-point solution agreed to by the government in 2011 involving the Christian community was an example of the benefits of engagement.

Jagir said the council would go on a nationwide tour to obtain feedback on the issue from Feb 22.